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SUBJECT: A REAL YODUK STORY

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Twenty-six-year-old Kim Eun-cheol has a five-hundred-dollar cellphone, a gold bracelet on his left wrist, and angry scars on both knees from being tortured in the DPRK. Kim was an inmate in North Korea's infamous Yoduk prison from 2000 until 2003 and is one of fewer than fifteen people known to have survived the camp and escaped North Korea to tell about it. In an August 22 conversation with us, he reported on conditions in Yoduk, where he witnessed two summary executions, saw about five people die of starvation each month, and stole food from guard dogs in order to survive. Kim's account is the most recent testimony regarding Yoduk No. 15 political prison camp. This is the same camp that formed the basis for the musical, "A Yoduk Story," which will debut in Washington on September 21. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND ON YODUK

12. (SBU) Yoduk No. 15, located in South Hamgyeong Province, is one of five known political prison camps in the DPRK. (NOTE: The others are Kaechon No. 14; Hwasong No. 16; Hoeryong No. 22; and Chongjin No. 25. The total population of these camps is believed to be between 150,000 to 200,000. END NOTE). The U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea estimated in their 2003 report, "The Hidden Gulag," that there were about 33,000 inmates at Yoduk. Other former inmates have reported that the camp has a "complete control" zone, which has about 30,000 inmates with life sentences and no hope of release, and a separate "revolutionary" zone, where inmates serve fixed terms. The Hidden Gulag reported that there were only about 2,000 to 3,000 people in the revolutionary zone as of 1992. According to the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU)'s 2006 "White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea," inmates of the revolutionary zone consist mostly of Pyongyang's ex-elites and repatriates from Japan.

FOILED ESCAPE FROM THE DPRK

13. (SBU) Kim is from Musan City, which is just inside the Chinese border in North Hamgyeong Province. Looking for

food, Kim crossed into China in April 1999. He met six other defectors in Yanji, the capital of Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, and joined them en route to the ROK. In November 1999, Russian guards arrested the seven crossing the Chinese-Russian border. We understand that the arrests were reported on November 12 in the Japanese Sankei Shimbun newspaper. NGOs were active in further publicizing the case by sending letters to Russian President Yeltsin, the UNHCR and Amnesty International. Although the UNHCR recognized the group as refugees in December, the Russians turned the seven over to Chinese authorities on December 30. Kim escaped Chinese custody and, after hiding in China for approximately ten days, returned to Musan. The Chinese repatriated the other six to North Korea. (NOTE: The other six were Heo Yong-il, Bang Yong-soon, Lee Dong-myong, Jang Ho-yong, Kim Kwang-ho, and Kim Sung-il. END NOTE.)

TORTURED UNDER INTERROGATION

¶4. (SBU) DPRK authorities caught Kim soon after he returned to the DPRK and imprisoned him for six months in an interrogation center near the border. Kim said that during the first three months, his interrogators regularly tortured him. For example, they forced Kim to crouch for long periods of time with a wooden pole placed behind his knees, clamped between his calves and thighs. Demonstrating this position to us, Kim explained that booted guards would then stomp on top of his legs. This crushed Kim's toes backwards, inflicted extreme pain to his legs, and hyperextended his knees. Interrogators also forced Kim to kneel forward onto fire-heated iron plates, which were being used to heat the room. Thick burn scars are still readily visible on Kim's knees.

¶5. (SBU) According to Kim, repatriated North Koreans would normally be sentenced to six months of hard labor at a labor training camp and then released. However, Kim's case was treated more seriously because, when in Russia, Kim had declined when North Korean diplomats tried to persuade him to return voluntarily to the DPRK. Under interrogation, officials accused Kim of denouncing North Korea in a third country, an act that would normally result in a death sentence or life imprisonment. Kim believed that he escaped this fate because his repatriation had attracted international attention. Instead, authorities sentenced him to three years at Yoduk No. 15. (NOTE: Several of our contacts in the NGO community questioned whether someone in Kim's position would in fact have been sentenced to death or life imprisonment. END NOTE.)

INCARCERATION IN YODUK

¶6. (SBU) Kim entered Yoduk in June 2000. He lived in a "village" called "guempri" that had a population of 200 to 250 people. New inmates were brought in quarterly. The inmates lived in a large barracks-like structure with men sleeping on one wing and women sleeping on the other. Unlike the old part of the camp, he said, inmates did not live in family units. The compound was encircled by concentric fences of electrified barbed wire and protected by guards, guard dogs, and deputized inmates.

¶7. (SBU) Most of the other inmates in Kim's village were former elites or party members. At twenty, he was the youngest in the village and often kept to himself. Kim said the others often teased him because of his low societal status compared to the others. He took revenge by informing on them when they violated camp rules. Kim's tormentors would then disappear for a few months and return "small as dogs, looking like skeletons." Kim said he did not know what happened to these people when they were taken away. (NOTE: In "Aquariums of Pyongyang," former Yoduk inmate Kang Chol-hwan wrote that prisoners who committed "the most trifling of offenses" would be sent to the "sweatbox (which) is one of the harshest punishments imaginable." The sweatbox was "simply grisly: the privation of food; close confinement, crouching on one's knees, hands on thighs, unable to

move...Hardly anyone exited the sweatbox on his own two feet." END NOTE).

¶8. (SBU) The inmates were generally responsible for their own clothing. Kim knew he would be in for three years, so he prepared three years' worth of clothing when he entered. Sometimes clothing that was confiscated from smugglers at the border was distributed to the inmates. Thus, you could not normally see South Korean blue jeans in North Korea, but you could in Yoduk, he said.

HARD LABOR AND LITTLE FOOD

¶9. (SBU) Yoduk is primarily a labor camp for political prisoners. Kim was first assigned to construction work, which involved building various living quarters and pigsties. His normal routine was to wake at 3:30 am, work until 6:30, eat breakfast, work from 7:00 until noon, eat lunch, and then work until sunset, which in the summertime was around 21:00 or 22:00. People who did not meet their work quota or did a poor job would not receive food.

¶10. (SBU) Regular food rations were barely life-sustaining. The diet consisted of corn kernels cut to resemble rice and "radish and salt soup." Each person was entitled to 175 grams (about three-quarters cup) of corn per meal for a total daily allowance of 525 grams. Inmates were given extra food, even meat, on Kim Il-sung's and Kim Jung-il's birthdays.

¶11. (SBU) Getting enough food was a constant struggle. Kim said that in his village about four or five people died of starvation each month. Each area in the camp was probably different, he said. People who were not used to struggling to survive, such as many of the party elite with whom he was incarcerated, died. Kim, meanwhile, had been accustomed to "getting by" and was able to adjust to camp life. Kim said he stole food from guard dogs and confirmed that prisoners often ate insects, rodents and other creatures.

¶12. (SBU) After several months working in construction, Kim was transferred to work in the work unit's kitchen. This was good work that he received as a reward for working hard in construction. He was one of three people responsible for preparing food, serving the other inmates, and cleaning the dishes. Not only was this easier than outdoor labor, but he was able to obtain extra food for himself. His tenure as a kitchen worker abruptly ended when he was caught passing extra food to his friends. As punishment, guards sent Kim to work in the cornfields for several months, and then back to construction.

PUBLIC EXECUTIONS

¶13. (SBU) Kim said that two villagers tried to escape, one in 2000 and another in 2003. In both cases, about a week after capture, the guards called all of the villagers to witness a public "trial" and execution by firing squad. When asked whether the other inmates had to desecrate the corpses, a practice described in other accounts of Yoduk, Kim said that the guards had abandoned that practice. Kim also said that he was unaware of instances of infanticide. According to Kim, international attention to human rights issues had caused central authority officers visit the camp and oversee the guards' behavior.

FINAL RELEASE AND ESCAPE

¶14. (SBU) Kim left Yoduk in July 2003 after completing his three-year sentence. He tried to escape North Korea again in August, but was caught after three days in China. Repatriated to North Korea, family members bribed guards to secure his release and forge documents to make it appear that he never left in August. However, in January 2004, central party officials found that Kim's documents were fake and sent him to a labor-training camp. He escaped to China after five

months. Kim's brother in the ROK arranged for Kim to escape through Vietnam to Cambodia, where he stayed for six months in a church safe house. Kim then traveled through Thailand and arrived in the ROK in March 2006.

ADJUSTING TO THE ROK

¶15. (SBU) Kim graduated from the Ministry of Unification's Hanawon program in July and recently moved into an apartment in Incheon. Upon arriving in the ROK, Kim agreed to pay a broker 5,500 USD to get his girlfriend out of the DPRK. The extraction was successful, and the girlfriend is currently in Hanawon. Kim talks to her several times a day on his new "LG Chocolate" cellphone, which is available locally for about 500 USD. Kim used part of his resettlement allowance to pay for it. Meanwhile, Kim is trying to decide what he wants to do with his life. "Maybe I'll become a gymnast," he said. More on Kim's adjustment to life in the ROK will be reported septel.

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) Kim's account of Yoduk No. 15 is generally consistent with the testimony of other former inmates. The daily struggle for food is a constant theme and the summary executions punctuate the barbarity of the camp. However, Kim's depiction of starvation in Yoduk is worse than other accounts. For example, Kim's statement that "four or five" people per month died from malnutrition in his village of 200-250 people reflects a considerably higher death rate than depicted in Kang Chol-hwan's testimony. In "The Hidden Gulag," Kang recounted that there were about 200 deaths annually in his village of 2,000 to 3,000. In other aspects, however, Kim's account was more positive. That he knew of no instances of infanticide or corpse mutilation can be considered a positive development.

¶17. (SBU) Another notable aspect of Kim's account was his belief in the impact of international attention to human rights. According to Kim, the publicity preceding his repatriation helped him escape a death or life sentence and resulted in mitigation of at least some of the camp's inhumane practices. If he is correct, and international opinion is having a tangible impact on human rights within North Korea, Kim's account argues strongly in favor of more vigorous international advocacy for human rights in the DPRK. However, we caution that Kim's opinion on this point appears to be based entirely on speculation.

STANTON